

CHAPTER 1

BLOWING SMOKE

SECRET ISLAMABAD 002295

Money alone will not solve the problem of al-Qaeda or the Taliban operating in Pakistan. A grand bargain that promises development or military assistance in exchange for severing ties will be insufficient to wean Pakistan from policies that reflect accurately its most deep-seated fears. The Pakistani establishment, as we saw in 1998 with the nuclear test, does not view assistance—even sizable assistance to their own entities—as a trade-off for national security.

*—Anne Patterson, then US ambassador to Pakistan,
in a secret cable to the National Security Council,
September 23, 2009, disclosed by WikiLeaks*

ON A SUNDAY MORNING IN EARLY OCTOBER 2011, PRESIDENT Obama’s national security adviser, Tom Donilon, was driven through a wealthy suburb of Abu Dhabi. It was the kind of backdoor, no-photos diplomatic mission he enjoyed most: the quiet delivery of an urgent message directly from the president of the United States. A decade after 9/11, Donilon was overseeing the Obama administration’s effort to end what he called the messiest “unfinished business” of the Bush years: Iraq and Afghanistan. Iraq was in its final chapter: in just a few months, the last American troops would drive

out of the country on the same road they had driven in on, eight years before. Extracting Washington from Afghanistan—the “war of necessity” as Obama used to put it, before he reconsidered the phrase—was far more difficult. A promising-sounding game plan, to train the Afghan troops to defend their own country, was sputtering along. But precious few of the gains American troops had fought for seemed permanent. Obama’s aides feared that the American withdrawal could lead to economic crisis and a Taliban resurgence.

Meanwhile, the relationship with the truly vital player in the region, Pakistan, had entered into such a death spiral there was a real possibility that American troops would be sent into the territory of an ostensible ally to hunt down insurgents targeting Americans.

At fifty-six, his hair thinning a bit, Donilon looked like a slightly disheveled version of the consummate Washington lawyer that he was. He had risen through the ranks of the Democratic Party as a superb political operator. In his early twenties, he managed the convention floor for Jimmy Carter; later he gained a reputation for getting presidential candidates through their debates.

Most of Washington knew Donilon as a canny political strategist, and political combat certainly made him tick. But the political world and the foreign-policy world in Washington often operate in different orbits, and what many missed about Donilon was his determination to live in both simultaneously. He dates that decision to one day when he was in his third year of law school and had lunch with Warren Christopher, the deputy secretary of state, whom he had gotten to know in the Carter administration.

“He came to lunch with this book, and he pushed it across the table to me,” Donilon recalled. “He said, ‘Politics is the easiest and most lucrative path for you. But you might consider another path.’ ” The book was an old copy of *Present at the Creation*, an account of the remaking of American national security after World War II, by Harry Truman’s secretary of state, Dean Acheson. Donilon took it home and read it several times. (That copy is still on his bookshelf.)

He was hooked. For years, he could be seen carrying a battered L.L.Bean tote bag home, overflowing with ponderous articles on foreign policy and national security. When Christopher became Bill Clinton's first secretary of state, he installed Donilon down the hall as his chief of staff. And while Donilon returned to politics and law practice during the Bush years, he was clearly itching to get back into the game, constantly peppering old State Department colleagues, journalists, and academics with questions about how America's actions were perceived around the world.

Now he was present at a different creation—the effort to sustain and extend American power in a world of many more diverse threats, and new competitors, than Acheson ever could have imagined. As national security adviser, Donilon was the first person to brief the president of the United States on national security challenges every morning—he kept a precise count of how many such briefings he had done, a habit endlessly parodied by his staff—and relished special missions to deal with the hardest cases. This was one of them.

IN ABU DHABI, Donilon was accompanied by two of the most central players in the effort to find an exit from Afghanistan. One was the special assistant to the president for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Douglas Lute, the wry retired general who had served in the last two years of the Bush White House and stayed on, quickly becoming Donilon's guide to the wily ways of Afghan presidents, Pakistani generals, and the Pentagon bureaucracy. (Apart from Bob Gates, the secretary of defense, Lute was the only source of institutional memory in the White House for what had been tried, and what had failed, during the Bush years.) The other man in the car was Marc Grossman, Obama's recently appointed special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan. A soft-spoken career diplomat, he agreed, after the death of Richard Holbrooke, to take on one of the hardest jobs in Washington: finding out whether there was a way to reach

a political accommodation with Mullah Mohammed Omar's Taliban, after ten years of war.

For a delegation of presidential envoys, it was a pretty unassuming motorcade: a couple of unmarked vans, rumbling past homes that looked like they belonged in Laguna Beach, one of the men later said. They were headed to a town house that belonged to a local intelligence agency friendly to the Pakistani government. It was the perfect place for a discreet meeting with the embattled, often-times embittered, commander of the Pakistani military forces: Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani.

Kayani is the most powerful man in Pakistan. When formal meetings with the Pakistanis were held for the cameras, Americans would sit down with the Pakistani president or prime minister and laud the arrival of a democratically elected civilian government. That was almost entirely for show. When they wanted to get something done, they ignored the civilians and called Kayani, who had risen through the ranks to become chief of the country's elite spy service, the ISI, or Inter-Services Intelligence, before becoming the head of the military. Kayani had clearly picked this venue so photographers and reporters would not know that he had slipped into town—Abu Dhabi, a favorite place for Pakistanis and Saudis making licit and illicit deals.

The meeting was Donilon's idea. After a year of crises—a trigger-happy CIA agent gone wild, the bin Laden raid, and a virulent rise of anti-Americanism—Donilon feared more trouble brewing. Just weeks before, a car-bomb attack on an American base in Wardak Province in Afghanistan had left seventy-seven Americans injured.¹ A few days later, an all-day attack on the American embassy in downtown Kabul, with rocket-propelled grenades, forced Ambassador Ryan Crocker to seek refuge in a basement safe room. Both attacks were quickly traced to the Haqqani network, a group that existed in the netherworld between an insurgent group and a criminal cartel, and lived unmolested in Pakistani territory.²

After the attack, the outgoing chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen, stood in front of the US Senate and delivered remarks that would have likely gotten him fired if he were not already halfway out the door. Mullen had been Obama's main interlocutor with the Pakistani military, but now, frustrated that more than twenty visits to the country had brought little change, he called the Haqqani network a "veritable arm" of the ISI.³

When Obama heard that his top military officer had made that charge in public, he was outraged—Mullen, he thought, was trying to save his reputation, to go out of office in a blaze of anger at the Pakistani military officers he had negotiated with for years. Obama didn't contend that Mullen was wrong, although the evidence that the ISI was directly involved in the attacks on Americans was circumstantial at best. But he knew that the accusation, in such a public setting, would trigger another round of recriminations with the country that had become the ally from hell.

When Donilon's team arrived, Kayani was already in the house, chain-smoking his Dunhill cigarettes. The out-of-the-way secrecy was pure Kayani, and the fact that Obama decided to send a high-ranking delegation to see him, not Pakistan's elected leadership, stroked his ego by reaffirming his primacy. Only a few short months before, Kayani had refused to deal seriously with the ambassadors and envoys from Washington—including Grossman—making clear he thought he deserved someone of higher rank. That would be Donilon, who played the role of secret interlocutor for Obama with the leadership of China and Saudi Arabia. (In fact, he had just come from a lengthy meeting in Riyadh with the Saudi king, trying to tamp down Saudi outrage at the American stance during the protests that ousted President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt.) But Pakistan was his toughest account.

Kayani was nothing if not unpredictable. To him, managing Americans meant following through with just enough promises to

keep the brittle US-Pakistani alliance from fracturing. Polite and careful most of the time, he knew how to charm by offering up memories from his years in officer training in the United States. At other times, he was angry and bitter, lecturing the Americans about how often they had promised the world to Pakistan and promptly abandoned the country out of pique, anger, or a short attention span.

Though the Americans could have settled into a comfortable living room, Kayani insisted they sit more formally at a table. The general was clearly not in the mood for casual chitchat.

Donilon opened the meeting where Mullen had left off. “The ultimate responsibility of the president of the United States is to protect Americans,” Donilon said in his clipped Rhode Island accent, reiterating something Obama had said to Kayani one day in the Roosevelt Room of the White House. Either Pakistan was going to deal with the Haqqani network or the Americans would. The message just sat there for a moment. Donilon went on. Why, he asked, would a man like Kayani, who grew up in the disciplined world of the Pakistani military, let a group of thugs hijack Pakistan’s national security policy by waging war on America from inside its borders?

Then came the bottom line: “I know you want a guarantee from us that we won’t undertake unilateral operations in your country again,” a reference to the bin Laden raid. “I can’t give you that.” If seventy Americans had died in the bomb attack in Wardak the previous month, rather than just suffered injuries, “we wouldn’t be having this conversation,” Donilon said. It was a not-so-veiled threat that Obama would have been forced to send Special Operations Forces into Pakistan to attack the Haqqani network—national pride and sovereignty be damned.

“We’re at a crossroads,” Donilon concluded. “If this continues, you’ve really turned your fate over” to the Haqqani network.

When Donilon was finished, Kayani laid out his demands—and the chasm between them was obvious. The United States, he said, could never, ever again violate Pakistani sovereignty with an attack like the one they launched on Osama bin Laden’s compound. That attack, he said, had been a personal humiliation. The Americans responded with silence.

“That was the tensest moment,” one of the participants in the meeting noted, because it was an issue on which the two countries were never going to agree. Kayani moved on to his other concerns. The Americans were spending billions—approximately \$12 billion in 2011—training the Afghan military and police.⁴

Should Afghanistan collapse someday in the near future—not an unlikely scenario—it would leave an armed, angry force just across the Pakistani border, Kayani said, many of them enemies of Pashtuns. And that would be a recipe for disaster. The Pashtuns are Sunnis, and they are also Afghanistan’s largest ethnic group, about 40 percent of the population. But they live on both sides of the porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, a line of demarcation named after Henry Mortimer Durand, the British foreign secretary in the 1890s. The Durand line is a completely arbitrary boundary, an artifact of the British colonial era, that cuts straight through Pashtun tribal areas. The world may see the Durand line as a border between two nations, but the Pashtuns sure don’t—particularly the Taliban. Today their leadership is living on the Pakistani side. But Kayani recalled that in the ’90s, when they ruled Afghanistan, the Taliban systematically massacred non-Pashtun ethnic groups—specifically the Hazara, a Shi’a minority that has close ties with Iran.

If things fell apart, Kayani insisted, the Pashtuns in both Afghanistan and Pakistan could find themselves pitted against a force armed and trained by the United States. Had the Americans thought about that? Or the possibility that as the US forces pull

out of Afghanistan, India—which had already invested billions in the Afghan government—would continue to extend its prowess in an effort to encircle Pakistan?

Having laid their cards on the table, the group of men went on to talk about their visions for Afghanistan’s future and their troubled effort to negotiate with the Taliban. Donilon had sent ahead a document laying out the long-term American strategy, including a plan to keep somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000 American counterterrorism troops in Afghanistan, mostly at Bagram Airfield, a large base just outside Kabul, “to protect the interests of the US in the region.” His meaning was clear: the United States would remain, and its troops would be ready to go over the Pakistani border if they needed to.

It was a conversation tinged with wariness on all sides, reflecting the distrust that permeated a relationship fractured by decades of betrayals. To Kayani, the three men in front of him represented a United States that had abandoned Pakistan before—during its wars with India, after the Soviets left Afghanistan, after Pakistan’s nuclear tests. And to the Americans, the fact that Kayani spent five and a half hours blowing the refined smoke of his Dunhills into their faces said it all. The smoke cloud lingered, enveloping the men in a fog.



IF KAYANI WIELDED secondhand smoke as a negotiating tool, it was one of the less lethal weapons at his disposal in his treacherous climb to power. From 2004 to 2007, when he ran the ISI, he excelled at managing what two successive American presidents came to deride as Pakistan’s “double game.” The phrase referred to Islamabad’s habit of preserving its options by fighting on both sides of the Afghan War. But the phrase was misleading. It understated the complexity of Pakistan’s position. Kayani’s task was to maintain

Pakistan's tenuous, yet crucial, influence in Afghanistan and convince his own people (and fellow generals) that he was not letting the far more powerful India encircle Pakistan by expanding its presence in Afghanistan unchallenged.

"Kayani initially impressed me," Mullen told me, referring to his first meetings with the Pakistani general, "as someone who knew the totality of his country in a way that I don't know mine. He knew about its economics, he knew about its finances, he knew about its industries, he knew its people." And while Kayani did not have direct control over Pakistan's nuclear arsenal—roughly one hundred weapons and growing—the ISI played a critical role in keeping it safe.

Of course, "safe" meant very different things to the men in that room. To the Americans, it meant preventing terrorists from getting ahold of nuclear weapons or material from the world's most vulnerable arsenal. To Kayani, it meant, first and foremost, protecting that arsenal from the Americans, and making sure that, unlike that night in Abbottabad when they snuck in to kill Osama bin Laden, no SEAL team could seize or disable Pakistan's weapons. It was hardly paranoia. The Americans had an elaborate, well-rehearsed plan to do exactly that, which had been ramped up and revised when Obama came into office. At the same time, Obama stopped talking publicly about Pakistan's nuclear stockpile, knowing that even benign mentions fueled the ISI's paranoia. But all the quiet diplomacy, and offers of additional American help, heightened Pakistan's suspicions. And the more the Obama team examined the long-term threat of an expanding Pakistani arsenal—something Donilon had ordered up extensive studies about—the more the White House came to realize that the future of Pakistan was a far greater strategic threat to the United States than the future of Afghanistan. It was not an accident that by the end of Obama's first year, the goals in Afghanistan and Pakistan had been reduced to merely three. While the first key objective was to keep Kabul from falling back into the hands of the Taliban, the other two had little

to do with Afghanistan: (1) disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda, and (2) prevent terrorists from working their way inside Pakistan's nuclear program. Neither of those problems was on the Afghan side of the border.

Kayani understood the American paranoia about a Pakistani meltdown, and he took advantage of it—which is one of the reasons he was the shrewdest survivor in the brutal Pakistani power game. As commander of the Pakistani military, he excelled at entertaining a parade of American visitors—senators, ambassadors, special envoys—who would arrive to lecture him about what Washington would no longer tolerate. Kayani would listen, take another drag on his cigarette, and try to get them to imagine how vulnerable both countries would be to terror groups if Washington ever made good on its threats to cut off Pakistan from the flow of money and arms the United States had been providing to fight terrorists. As he often told his own staff, the Americans talked a tougher game than they walked. Scratch beneath America's veneer of threats to cut off billions in aid or escalate strikes inside Pakistan's borders, and you would find a superpower that simply could not afford to risk breaking off relations. Not while Pakistan controlled the supply routes into Afghanistan, which—when tensions escalated—it shut off to remind Washington that its troops wouldn't last long without food and bullets. Not while Pakistan was a brew of 180 million people—nine times the population of Afghanistan—and home to several brutal insurgencies and the fastest-growing nuclear arsenal on earth.

As Lute often reminded his colleagues, "At the end of the day, breaking off relations with Pakistan or containing it might feel satisfying, but the next day you have to wake up and deal with them."

The three Americans told Kayani they had incriminating evidence about the latest two bold attacks against Americans in Afghanistan. Donilon had already spent hours poring through the intelligence, pressing the CIA and the National Security Agency—which routinely taps the ISI's cell phones—for every scrap that

would tie members of Pakistan's elite spy service to the insurgents who had detonated car bombs and laid siege to the embassy. The case was circumstantial, as always. There was ample evidence that the ISI and others in the Pakistani military supplied the Haqqanis and gave them a free pass to cross the Pakistan-Afghanistan border along its most remote, dangerous stretches. But there was no smoking gun that the ISI had actually ordered the attack.

Always the lawyer, Donilon began making his case. He had a habit of starting each new argument with the phrase "Here's the deal," and then hitting three or four points. This time, Donilon listed the specific intelligence the United States had gathered. He described the Haqqani houses, places where the United States believed the attacks were plotted. He pointed to the madrassa in Miranshah—a religious school where extremist ideology was taught—that fed the Haqqanis with fresh recruits. The school, the United States had often reminded Kayani, is just a few kilometers from a Pakistani military outpost. Lute had often joked that if the Pakistani troops ever ventured out of their base for physical training, they could jog to the madrassa, touch its walls, and jog back.

Kayani took in the evidence silently, without pushing back. Well, Donilon thought, at least we're not bullshitting each other. He knows we have the goods—he knows that I'm as informed an intelligence official as there is in the world.

"We will undertake whatever steps we need to protect our forces," Donilon said. "We would prefer to act jointly. But if you refuse"—he could have said, if you agree and do nothing—"we will come in and do what we have to do." He did not need to add that the American model of success in this regard was Abbottabad, where seventy commandos infiltrated Pakistani airspace, landed forty miles from the Pakistani capital, killed bin Laden and his few protectors, and swept up his computers—all without setting off Pakistan's defenses. The unspoken message was, "We can do it again."

Kayani took another drag on the cigarette and blew a little

more smoke. Donilon, Lute, and Grossman knew what that meant. The Pakistanis had no intention of turning over or taking on the Haqqani network; it was their insurance policy for the moment when the Americans would inevitably leave.

And when Donilon, Lute, and Grossman got home—a seventeen-hour flight aboard a military jet—they knew their first stop: the dry cleaners. Getting the fumes out of their suits would be easy enough. Detoxifying the American relationship with Pakistan would be much more difficult.